UNIT 5: PROPERTY

UNIT STRUCTURE

5.1 Learning Objectives
5.2 Introduction
5.3 Concept of Property
5.4 Slavery - Human beings as a form of property
5.5 Property as a form of social relationship
5.6 Perspectives on property
5.6.1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's perspective
5.6.2 Karl Marx's perspective
5.7 Let us sum up
5.8 Further Reading
5.9 Answers to Check your Progress
5.10 Model Questions

5.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to

- comprehend the idea of property, its various types and forms
- know the concept of property in terms of it's sociological and economic significance
- know the entity of slavery
- know the philosophy of property from the perspectives of Hegel and Karl Marx.

5.2 INTRODUCTION

Property, in common parlance, is defined as any object/thing which is controlled and owned by someone. In simple economic approach, the possession of property is identified with material wealth and the legal aspects associated with it. However, in sociological terms, property is defined beyond wealth and legitimacy. Sociologically, property defines social relationships in a society. Society and its various elements are dynamic entities, which directly implies that the notion of property also changes with the change in

societal elements. Thus the idea of property is subject to temporal and spatial variation, which can be well understood with the help of the significant theories and philosophies of property, discussed in this unit.

Property and its ownership has been of particular importance for the students of both Economics and Sociology. The following account highlights the notion of property, in terms of its conceptualization and definition.

5.3 CONCEPT OF PROPERTY

Property can be literally defined as component(s), either tangible or intangible, which is featured by an ownership by either a single person, or a group, a society or corporation. A property is defined by strict legal rules, which further state as to how the property is to be used, the rights of mortgage, sale, rent, share, transfer, etc. It is evident that the owner has the exclusive rights over his/her property.

In economic terms property is classified into three categories:

- Private property: It is a type of property whose ownership is held by a legalized non-government body. It is different from personal property which refers to property meant for one's personal usage or consumption.
- Public property: This type of property is owned by the state and is meant for public use.
- Collective property: This type of property is also called cooperative property. It is characterized by common ownership by a community or an organization, and not individual ownership.

Some other important types of property that are recognised in the modern day are:

- Real property: It is the type of property which consists of land and any modification or improvement on it.

- Intellectual property: This type of property refers to exclusive rights of owners or creators over their creation i.e. innovations, artistic pieces, inventions, etc.

The concept of property has been subject to scholarly analyses. There are several theories which discuss the idea of property, as highlighted below.

- Theory of Classical Liberalism: This theory identifies itself with the labour theory of property. It argues that individuals are the owners of their own lives, and hence are also the owners of the products of their lives. However, those products, according to this theory, may be traded or exchanged with others, as per the desire of the owner.
- Conservative theory: This view argues that the freedom of an individual is related to property. According to this theory, the more a society is characterized by private property ownership, the more productive and stable it is.
- Socialist Theory: This view is in stark contradiction to the conservative nation of property. It argues that private property may only benefit private individual owners and not the society at large. According to it, for the benefit and development of all, it is essential that property is owned by the state or by the citizens in the form of a collective group.

5.4 SLAVERY - HUMANS BEINGS AS A FORM OF PROPERTY

Slavery, in its literal form, refers to a system whereby people are treated as property, thereby making provision for the transaction of human beings as a property. It was recognized as a legal practice during the times it was prevalent. A person could be a slave from his/her birth, or from the time he/she has been purchased or captured. The legality of the practice disables the slaves from withdrawing unilaterally from the contract. Further, the slaves were made to provide their services without any remuneration. Slavery is also often referred to as forced labour or unfree labour. The origin of slavery dates back to the times when written history had not reached.

While slavery has been considered to have existed in several cultures, places and in different points in time, it has however been noticed that slavery was very rare in the hunting-gathering societies. This is so because for slavery to exist, it requires a surplus economy and a high density of population, which may further give rise to the ideas of division, hierarchy, inequality, etc, which may facilitate the birth of systems like slavery. Thus, it was only in the Neolithic times with the emergence and spread pf agriculture that slavery is argued to have spread far and wide. Slavery has been found to be a characteristic of several civilizations and societies across the world. Also, it is seen that slaves have always been made to be easily identified, owing to the distinct manner of clothing that they were supposed to adhere to. For example, slaves were not allowed to wear any footwear.

Slavery has been found and recognized in many forms. Some common types of slavery that have been identified and classified are :

- Chattel Slavery: It is also called traditional slavery. In this type of slavery, the slaves are considered to be the chattel or the personal property of the owner. Hence, here the slaves are often subject to being bought and sold like goods. In this system, slavery was considered to be hereditary by nature. Therefore the children of the enslaved automatically became slaves by birth. This was a common type of slavery in early times, which has been abolished in the modern times. However even in present times the traces of traditional slavery may be seen in some societies, although it lacks the legal state recognition now.
- Bonded Labour: It is also referred to as indentured labour or debt bondage. In this system of slavery, a person makes a pledge to be a slave against a loan and through his/her services in order to repay the loan. The time required to repay the loan maybe indefinite, thereby leading to inter-generational slavery, whereby the children may have to repay the loan of their ancestors. It is still a common form of slavery.

- Forced Labour: This form of slavery refers to a system whereby people are coerced to work involuntarily and are governed by the power and control of the master or the owner. Several other institutions like serfdom, penal labour etc, are also considered to be subsets of this type of slavery. A predominant form of forced labour is said to be human trafficking.
- Forced marriage: Forced marriage is not a listed category of slavery. However, it may be recognized as a form of slavery by any or all of the parties involved or by those who are observing the marriage. Some common ways through which forced marriage may take the form of slavery are forced engagement in sexual activities, huge burden of domestic chores or any other work. It has been observed that the customs of dowry and bride price may also lead to the commodification of human beings.
- Dependents: It is a situation whereby an individual or a group is a legal dependent on another person.

Slavery has been a prominent subject of intellectual discourses. Some Economics studies have analysed the conditions and circumstances which determine the existence or absence of slavery in a society. Some of such circumstances are discussed below:

Slavery becomes a desirable practice in places where there is scarcity of labour and landowners have abundant land. Here, paid workers are likely to demand high wages since there is high demand for labour. Therefore, in such circumstances, it becomes profitable for one to keep a slave.

Again, slavery is likely to rise in places when the labour to be done involves simple exercises. This makes the exercise easy to be supervised, unlike in case of complex exercises.

5.5 PROPERTY AS A FORM OF SOCIAL RELATIONSHIP

The concept of property in its economic dimensions has been illustrated above. In Sociological terms, property is comprehended in the

form of a collection of rights over both living (people, animals) and non-living objects (land, house, etc). These rights and the various forms that they may be exercised in, differ over space and time. These rights further give rise to a definite identity for the people, which in turn leads to the growth of social relations amongst people. This is because the possession or non-possession of property rights indicate who have/do not have access to certain objects/people, which further signify as to who are the more powerful people in the society.

Sociological approach to property, it is stated, is primarily concerned with the following aspects of property:

- Acquisition: It indicates the process by which individuals/groups attain access to property.
- Distribution: It refers to the entire system of managing and controlling the property ownership pattern which shall include not only the underlying principles behind it, but also the institutional arrangements that facilitate the process.

Further, sociological analysis of property is interested in the consequent impacts that ownership/non-ownership of property may have on individuals/ groups or on the society as a whole.

Also, Sociology tries to explore and understand the ideologies and values that justify and define property and rights of men over them.

The idea of property as a form of social relationship can be well comprehended by Karl Marx's concept of relations of production. In popular terminology, relations of production is defined as the relations between the non-owners and the owners of means of production. This definition, is however, considered to be flawed by several scholars. It is argued that identifying the concept of relations of production with the ownership of means of production only displays the legal and economic aspect of it, since ownership is a legal entity. In the process the social significance of it is lost. Thus there have been attempts to understand relations of production from a non-legal/non-economic perspective. This has resulted in the conception of relations of production as the power and capacity to posses an object or product. It is inevitable that the relations of production may vary from society

to society. Thus, a hunting-gathering society may not manifest a significant relation of power and subordination amongst people because such societies are nomadic and lack the idea of possession of property. On the contrary, in a feudal society where land is the most significant form of property, there exists a power relation between the landlords and the serfs, by dint of their access/non-access to land ownership. Again, in a capitalist society there exists a strong manifestation of relations of production between the bourgeoisie (owners of means of production) and the proletariats (non-owners of means of production). This is because the bourgeoisie both owns and controls means of production and the entire process of distribution and consumption of goods and services. This inevitably results in an antagonistic relation of superiority and inferiority whereby the proletariat class is at the receiving end. It must be noted that relations of production do not particularly refer to relations between individual owners and non-owners, but to the generalized classes of owners and non-owners of means of production.

It implies that one's access to ownership of goods and objects defines an important social aspect which is beyond the legal attributes. Thus ownership/ non ownership of property not only signifies an individual's/group's/society's economic position, but simultaneously highlights the social relations that exist between people and classes.

5.6 PERSPECTIVES ON PROPERTY

As mentioned above, property as a concept has been widely studied. The following account throws light on the philosophy of property, as discussed by Hegel and Marx.

5.6.1 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's perspective on property

The contribution of Hegel to the philosophy of property is considered to be very significant. He discusses property in terms of three aspects - the possession of property, the usage of property, the alienation of property. Hegel argues that the rationality behind the idea of possessing property does not lie in the quest for need satisfaction. He argues that if the factor of need satisfaction is considered to be

the end, then possession of property becomes the means to achieve it. According to Hegel, man seeks property because possession of property provides him a kind of freedom and reason for his existence which further implies that property is an end in itself. However, since one's identity is attached to property which is entirely an external entity, therefore it may also be considered as a false realization.

Hegel argues that the nature of things is such that it cannot be so particularistic to be considered as anyone's private property or possession.

Possession of something, according to Hegel, can be taken by three primary means; by taking away the thing physically, by making it, and by simply identifying it as belonging to oneself.

The first method i.e. physically taking away a thing seems to be the apt way to take possession of it as it involves the physical presence of the possessor and the instant witness of the act of possession can be seen. However, in pragmatic terms, it may be difficult to undertake this process.

The next way to take possession is by giving a thing a particular form. However, it is argued that a thing after being given a form may not necessarily be inherently identified with the one who has given it a form. In fact it shall develop an externality, which further shall discourage its direct possession by the one who has given it a form.

The third way of taking possession of a thing is by declaring one's possession and rights over it. This is so because it helps in the recognition of the thing by others as belonging to someone.

Further, it is obvious that the first person who takes possession of an object/thing inherently becomes the owner of it. This is so not only because he/she is the first to possess it, but also because he/she expresses their free will in that possession. However, the mere presence of free will and possession of a property may not be enough. He argues that for a thing to be identified as belonging to someone, it must also be recognized by others in the same way.

This realization and recognition by the others can be brought through occupancy of that particular object/thing.

The next aspect of property that Hegel emphasizes on is the usage of the property by the possessor. He argues that while by marking a thing as one's property, it automatically becomes recognized as his/her property, the possession is further re-instated by the usage of the property by the owner. Further, if a thing is grasped and used for instant need gratification, then it is seen as the possession of a single thing and defines immediacy of the act. However, if the thing is put to use in a persistent manner, then its possession acquires a universal character. In order to continue the possession of a thing permanently one's will and identity must be kept intact continuously. The continuity of this will and identity can be maintained by its continuous usage and by ensuring its safety.

The third aspect of property, discussed by Hegel, is alienation of property. Hegel argues that a property can be alienated by the owner by virtue of the fact that he/she owns it. Thus, the possessor may abandon to take control of or cease to identify his/her free will with his/her property, and give it to someone else. In this process, the property begins to be identified with the free will, control, and usage of the new possessor.

Hegel also discusses the importance of contracts in the context of property possession. The above account emphasizes on the significance of realization of one's free will in a thing, and also the recognition of it by others for it to be identified as his/her possession. However, Hegel argues that it is the will of both the parties i.e. the common will that enables one to be identified as the just possessor of a property. Thus it is the contract between the two parties that signifies and justifies the ownership and control of one over a thing/object.

5.6.2 Karl Marx's perspective on property

Karl Marx's notion of property and its origin can be understood through his concept of historical materialism, also known as dialectical materialism. Historical materialism shows Marx's idea of the evolution and progress of the society from one stage of development to another. Each stage, according to Marx, is characterized by a particular level of technological development, which further determines not only the economic structure of the society, but also indicates the kind of social relations that exist amongst people in that society, as has been discussed above. In this context, it is evident that the conception of property too undergoes changes with every stage of social development and progress. In order to understand this, it is important to understand Marx's concepts of Mode of production, relations of production, and forces of production.

Mode of production refers to the relations between relations of production and forces of production. Relations of production, in simple terms, is defined as the relation between the owners and the non owners of the means of production. Forces of production denotes the techniques, tools used in the production. According to Karl Marx, in every mode of production, the perception of property varies, and hence the consequent social aspects of it also vary.

It has been mentioned above that the primitive mode of production is likely not to manifest distinct ideas of property and its ownership as the primitive society is a largely nomadic society. On the contrary, the feudal mode of production displays significant notions of property due to the emergence and predominance of land as the most important object of possession.

The most blatant form of property and the associated assertion of rights and claims on property can be seen in the capitalist society. The capitalist society is characterized by the prevalence of private ownership of property. This evidently gives rise to two significant classes - the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The former

are the owners of the means of production, whereas the latter are the non owners of the means of production, also known as the haves and the have-nots respectively. Here, the bourgeoisie are the ones who manage and control the processes of production, distribution and consumption of goods and services. Also, they are the owners of the factories, industries, in short, they make the capital investments in the economy. The proletariat class, on the other hand, is the working class, who provide the labour supply in the economy. The respective position and roles of the two classes of people in the economy signifies the aspect of power that exists in the society. This is manifested in the relations of production between the bourgeoisie and the proletariats, which is guided by a sense of superiority and power of the former over the latter. Karl Marx is against the idea of ownership of property by private individuals. This according to Marx, as also discussed above, leads to the growth of an antagonistic relationship between the two prominent classes in the society. The antagonism further takes the form of exploitation of labour. Marx explains that the exploitation of workers in the capitalist society occurs in the working of the economy. An example of it is prevalence of the idea of the socially necessary labour time, which is defined as the amount of time that have to be worked by workers in order to produce a particular amount of goods. This implies that the workers are compelled to work for a definite time period which shall leave the workers exhausted and gradually isolated from a social life. This isolation is referred to by Marx as an important characteristic of the capitalist society, and is called alienation. Marx argues that alienation is broadly of four types. They are:

Alienation of worker from product: Here, the worker ceases to identify himself/herself with the products he/she has made or contributed to. This arises because in a capitalist society the design and the method of producing goods and services are not determined by the worker.

Alienation of worker from act of production: In a capitalist society there exists a strong division of labour. Hence, workers are assigned to definite tasks in the economy, which makes their work mechanical and repetitive. This nature of work leaves no psychological satisfaction for the worker, leaving the worker with no attachment with, or enthusiasm for his/her work.

Alienation of worker from fellow human beings: The workers here are made to work for a fixed amount of time on a daily basis, as explained above. The long and routine labour work leaves the workers with little time for recreation and socialization, thereby making the workers develop a feeling of aloofness from others.

Alienation of the worker from other workers: In the capitalist society labour becomes a commodity that is subject to exchange for money. This nature of work makes the workers lose the spirit of connectivity and intermingling amongst them.

The notion of property and particularly private ownership of property, according to Karl Marx, shall again cease to exist in the socialist society because the socialist society is characterized by state control and regulation of the economy. Therefore, the resources in this society are distributed in an egalitarian manner, as per the needs of people.



5.7 LET US SUM UP

- Property refers to a thing/object which is possessed and controlled by an individual/group, etc. The three predominant types of property are private property, public property and collective property.
- Slavery is a practice of exercising ownership and control over human beings, which has been found in several parts of the world in various forms and manifestations. Some recognized forms of slavery are chattel slavery, bonded labour, forced labour, forced marriage, dependents, etc.

- In sociological terms, property does not merely refer to possession of goods/objects, but defines social relationships in a society.
- The views of Hegel and Karl Marx are significant in understanding the philosophy as they have provided an important contribution to it.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. Mention two types of slavery.
2. Mention two types of property.
3. What is meant by alienation of workers from product?



5.8 FURTHER READING

1. Abercrombie, Nicholas; Stephen Hill & Bryan S. Turner; 2000; The Penguin Dictionary of Sociology; England.
2. Borgotta, Edgar F. & Rhonda J. V. Montgomery; 2000; Encyclopedia of Sociology; Cengage Learning Publisher.
4. Haralambos, H & R M Heald; 1997; Sociology : Themes and Perspectives; Oxford Publication.
5. Ritzer, George; 2010; Sociological Theory; McGraw Hill Education.

5.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No 1: Bonded labour, Forced labour

Ans to Q No 2: Real property, Intellectual property.

Ans to Q No 3: The situation when the worker ceases to identify himself/herself with the products he/she has made or contributed to, is called alienation of workers from product. This arises because in a capitalist

society the design and the method of producing goods and services are not determined by the worker.



5. 10 MODEL QUESTIONS

(A) Short Questions (Answer within 150 words)

Q. No.1. Conceptualise 'property'.

Q. No.2. What is meant by slavery?

(B) Long Questions (Answer within 300-500 words)

Q. No.1. What is the significance of property in sociological terms? Illustrate.

Q. No.2.. Explain the philosophies of Hegel and Karl Marx on property.

*** ***** ***